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Utah skiing guide: Park City, The Canyons and Deer Valley

Gabriella Le Breton enjoys the fabled 'champagne powder' in Utah, which has 14 world-class ski areas within an hours drive of the airport. Image 1 of 2 More than a third of its quiet pistes are rated advanced or expert Photo: ALAMY Image 1 of 2 Deer Valley appeals unashamedly to a wealthier, more mature audience than any other resort in North America Photo: ALAMY While Europe breathes a sigh of relief that snow is falling again in the Alps after the recent drought, Utah has been enjoying record snowfalls, with up to 250 per cent more snow having fallen across the state so far than last year. Given that the average annual snowfall in Utah is a whopping 500 inches (compared with European averages of 200 to 300 inches), anyone who spends much of the season hunting for that elusive powder need look no further. Following in the steps of countless pilgrims, I went to Utah last year in search of this fabled "champagne" powder. As I discovered, Utah's world-class ski resorts are very accessible: 11 of the 14 are located within one hour's drive of Salt Lake City airport, and seven of those within less than 45 minutes' drive. Furthermore, many of the resorts are clustered in ski areas with shared lift tickets (such as Alta, Snowbird, Brighton and Solitude), making it prime territory for a multi-resort trip. I plumped for a trio, making the 19th-century mining town of Park City my base from which to ski the local slopes and those of nearby Canyons, before indulging myself at Deer Valley, which is renowned for its pampering customer service. This would also enable me to ski through the week at Park City and Canyons, and escape the weekend "crowds" in Deer Valley (crowd is a relative term in these parts: it can mean no more than 12 people waiting for a lift). Just 40 minutes after picking up my luggage at Salt Lake City airport, I was settling into the stylish Sky Lodge hotel in Park City. Leaving closer inspection of the two-person hot tub on my balcony until later, I stretched my legs on the city's streets. Many of the original facades of Park City's 19th-century homes, a legacy of its successful mining history, have been preserved and now house chic boutiques, art galleries and restaurants. It's a lively place, with bustling cafes, bars and shops. But best of all, in my opinion, was the fact that I could see a chairlift in the heart of the city and people skiing straight off the mountain on to Main Street. The next morning proved that it takes just 12 minutes to reach the top of Park City's ski area from the city, opening up an impressive 3,300 acres of terrain. While much of this is ideal for beginners and intermediates, with gentle groomers galore, there's plenty to entertain advanced skiers as well 750 acres of ungroomed bowls and peaks. Although I didn't get lucky with heavy snowfall as I explored Park City, I delighted in creamy dustings of powder on immaculately groomed slopes in the mornings. And, even in what locals refer to as a "poor" snow month, there is always plenty of powder to be found off the pistes, between well-spaced aspen and pine trees, and in the steep Jupiter and McConkey Bowls.

As with many North American resorts, on-mountain dining in Park City isn't always a highlight of the ski experience, with most restaurants being self-service affairs, serving soups, pizza and sandwiches. However, by skiing down to Main Street, I could feast cheaply (and more healthily) at the Java Cow Bakery and choose from a number of restaurants with well-priced lunch menus.

I also discovered the ski-in High West small-batch artisan distillery, the first of its kind in the world (note the absence of the words "ski-out"). Appropriately located at the bottom of the "Quittin' Time" chairlift, the High West Saloon offers "small" plates of food just the thing for an après-ski snack while you are sampling some of the fruits of the labours of the distillery owner, David Perkin (my favourite was the Rendezvous Rye). After a well-lubricated tour and a whiskey fondue, I could appreciate why the distillery is best skied into and not out of. Located just four miles from Park City and linked by free buses, The Canyons is a purpose-built base village with large hotels, condominiums and shops. An additional 300 acres of ski terrain has been opened up this winter, so the resort's total acreage is 4,000, making it the largest ski area in Utah and the third largest in the United States. Almost all of it is below tree level. Its scale, combined with the convenience of the new village and child-friendly ski classes, nursery slopes and terrain parks, makes it hugely popular with young families.



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The Canyons incorporates groomed trails and back-country skiing on no fewer than seven mountains, with various aspects, meaning skiers can navigate the area to find the best snow (or most sunshine) during the day. The last big snowfall blew up from the south a few days before my visit, but I was still able to find pockets of untracked powder by seeking out south-facing canyons and glades.

All too soon, it was time to head for my third and final resort of the week: Deer Valley. This is only a 10-minute drive from Park City, but it soon became clear that it takes very seriously its commitment to providing "five-star service across the mountain". From the parking valet who carried my bags to the Deer Crest hotel's private funicular to the impeccably well-mannered and smiley ski valets and lift attendants, everyone at Deer Valley went out of their way to make skiing more effortless than I believed possible.

As I skied out of my hotel first thing on a Saturday morning, I was instantly struck by two things: first, the remarkably consistent smoothness of the corduroy slopes (groomed for 16 hours each night by a crack squad of 36 pisteurs) and, second, the lack of other skiers.

As the day wore on, I still had the corduroy largely to myself a positive side effect of Deer Valley's expensive lift tickets and policy to cap the number of ticket sales at 8,000 per day (with 2,026 acres of terrain, that still means only four skiers per acre even on the busiest days). And when I say skiers, I mean it snowboarders are not permitted in Deer Valley.

Deer Valley appeals unashamedly to a wealthier, more mature audience than any other resort in North America (with the exception of Beaver Creek, Colorado). A day's lift pass will set you back nearly \$100, but it will get you access to those dreamy groomers, 800 acres of tree skiing, six powder bowls and challenging chutes (including Utah's steepest), ski hosting to help you find (or avoid) those chutes, a network of shiny new lifts, ski valets, and overnight ski storage.

Despite this, Deer Valley has a surprisingly wide appeal. I shared chairlifts with a Manhattan banker, a telecommunications tycoon from Ottawa, a French ski instructor and a group of Salt Lake City students with the fattest skis I've ever seen. The students seemed slightly sheepish about being there. Though more than a third of its quiet pistes are rated advanced or expert, and it has plenty of off-piste terrain, Deer Valley is something of a guilty pleasure for gnarly freeskiers.

Its appeal has been aided by a relaxation of both laws and attitudes to drinking alcohol in this predominantly Mormon state. When I was last there, eight years ago, you joined a private club to drink liquor or you put up with withering looks when ordering a beer. The locals now appear infinitely more relaxed about (moderate) alcohol consumption. Indeed, in addition to the world's first ski-in distillery, Park City is home to the Wasatch County Brewery, proud brewer of "Polygamy Porter".

The label on the popular malty ale sums up the new, light-hearted approach: "Why have just one?" A sentiment equally applicable to Utah's ski resorts. Essentials W & O Travel Ski Dream (0845 277 3353; www.wandotravel.com/ski) is offering four nights in an executive suite at Hotel Park City and three nights in a deluxe room at St Regis Deer Crest from 2,539pp based on two sharing. The package is on a b & b basis and includes return flight to Salt Lake City with United Airlines, return shared transfers and a six-day triple-resort lift pass. Valid for departures from March 1 to March 31.



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